

May 6, 2015

Instructional Quality Commission
California Department of Education
Sacramento, CA

Dear IQC Members,

I write as a widely-published scholar in Sikh American Studies, and South Asian American history and contemporary cultural studies. I have taught Asian American, African American and Ethnic Studies courses at numerous universities in California, from The College of the Redwoods and Humboldt State University, to UC Berkeley, UC Davis, UC Irvine, UC Santa Barbara, and UCLA, to the Pacific School of Religion and CSU East Bay, where I held the Sabharwal Endowed Chair in Sikh and Punjabi Studies from 2009-2012. I have also trained high school history teachers in best practices for conveying the intersecting themes of African and Asian American history in curriculum design. In addition to numerous academic conferences throughout the nation, over the past two decades I have presented my research in a number of non-academic forums, from community venues, to the California State Legislature, to the Asian American Journalists Association.

Among my numerous research projects in the field of Sikh history, I have conducted extensive research and filming for a documentary excavating the lost history of Sikhs in the Second World War, and I am currently working on the first scholarly history of Sikh Americans. Furthermore, I co-founded the first Sikh Students Association in the state (UC Berkeley, 1989), as well as the Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund (SALDEF), the first Sikh American civil rights advocacy organization.

I write in concern over the possibility for the recent, long overdue inclusion of Sikh Americans into the California History-Social Science Framework— after years of fervent lobbying by community members— being imperiled by the changes requested by the Hindu American Foundation (HAF) and California Parents for the Equalization of Educational Materials (CPEEM). This baseless intrusion by non-expert, non-historians has the potential to extend the century of ignorance about, and devaluation of, Sikh Americans and their contributions to California's past. The comments by these organizations, instead of offering an historical corrective, are instead an explicit effort to extend the exclusion of Sikh Americans from the narrative of California history, a state where the community's roots stretch back 120 years.

Allow me to address each relevant point individually. To begin with, in the 4th Grade Introductory section, the HAF's desire to change "Sikhs" to "South Asians (from current day India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan)" is ahistorical, because none of these nations existed at the time of this migration. Prior to British colonialism, the area's inhabitants had never been governed by a single ruler, because numerous factors precluded the development of unitary nation/state in the region. But that does not mean that these areas did not have names that stretched from antiquity, from the indigenous residents of various regions.

Since the nearly all of the migrants in question came from Punjab, the region where Punjabi has historically been spoken, “South Asia” is an inaccurate descriptor of their point of origin. It is not nearly a precise enough term— encompassing seven nations, hundreds of languages, and even greater number of distinct ethnicities. The illuminating specificity of “Punjabi” contrasts sharply to the incredible ethnic and linguistic diversity articulated within “South Asia,” which contains far more distinct cultures, for example, than all of Europe.

For complete accuracy, the only changes I would implement in the current text are to add the word “Punjabi” before “Sikhs,” and “and Muslims” afterwards, to “Punjabi Sikhs and Muslims.” Otherwise, it would be most accurate to leave the text as is, as opposed to the misleading suggestion offered by the HAF.

Disturbingly, the HAF comment that, of the early migrants, “many were Hindu and Muslim” intentionally distorts history. Although referred to as “Hindoos” by the media and various government entities, only a minuscule proportion of the migrants in the early period of migration were actually followers of Hinduism. This was partially due to a religious prohibition that many Hindus believed precluded them from crossing the “dark water” (*kala pani*) on ships. Having no such theological limitations, Sikhs and Muslims comprised virtually the entire early migration to the U.S. from colonial South Asia.

In *The South Asian Americans*, the most recent scholarly effort to offer an overview of the community’s history, noted scholar Dr. Karen Leonard explains that “approximately 85 percent of the early immigrants. . . were Sikhs, and another 10 or 12 percent were Muslim.” (p. 43) These numbers are not controversial among scholars. Similarly, in the seminal text about the early history of migrants from colonial South Asia, *Passage From India*, historian Joan Jensen notes how “a few of the immigrants were Muslim or Hindu but most were turbaned Sikhs.” (p. 24)

Equally illogical is the HAF contention: “Given that the remaining groups are referred to by ethnicity or nationality, it would be more appropriate to say South Asians.” Like the other national groups in the text (Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino), Punjabi Sikhs share a linguistic and ethnic homogeneity. Despite the fact that they do not have their own nation, Sikhs clearly constitute a distinct ethnic group, with a sharply defined culture.

Just as important, Sikhs in the early 1900s, with their specific religious identifiers, were the primary targets of racially-based attacks against Punjabis from anti-Asian groups, organized white labor, politicians, and the mainstream press. Labeling them as “undesirables” or worse, the newspapers were especially influential in embedding dehumanizing and bigoted stereotypes about Sikhs and other Asian migrants in the nation’s popular imagination. For the Punjabi migrants, as Dr. Jensen makes clear, “the most important physical characteristic that helped exclusionists focus hostility on Indians was the turban,” drawing xenophobic references to them as “ragheads.” As a consequence, “much of the animosity thus came to be focused on the turban and on a cluster of complaints about cultural patterns that exclusionists associated with the turban.”

Sikhs, unlike members of other communities who also could don the headwear, are religiously enjoined to wear turbans and not shave their facial hair. As Ronald Takaki details in chapter eight of his classic Asian American history *Strangers from a Different Shore*, entitled “The Tide of Turbans,” this religious devotion made Sikhs the focus of exclusionists’ efforts to end migration from colonial South Asia. Wrote a contemporary observer:

Always the turban remains, the badge and symbol of their native land, their native customs and religion. Whether repairing tracks on the long stretches of the Canadian or Northern Pacific railways, feeding logs into the screaming rotary saws of the lumber mills, picking fruit in the luxuriant orchards or sunny hillsides of California, the twisted turban shows white or brilliant, a strange, exotic thing in the western landscape. (p. 295)

Besides such descriptions of Sikhs as representative of all Punjabi migrants, the title of the chapter itself signifies their dominance in the racialized, nativist discourse of the time, as a consequence of their palpable differences in skin color and religious attire.

Finally, since the list of the ethnicities in the curriculum text refers to those “who provided a new supply of labor for California’s railroads, agriculture and industry and contributed as entrepreneurs and innovators,” Sikhs are especially appropriate to include. As the above historical account demonstrates, they comprised the overwhelming majority of Punjabis in the railroad and agriculture industry at this time.

Considering Sikhs’ overwhelming numerical dominance within the migration, their demonization by exclusionists, and their prevalence in media depictions that focused on their racial and religious markers— turbans and prominent black beards on dark brown bodies— it is far more accurate, and important, to keep the word “Sikh” in the curriculum.

While the first HAF comment can be charitably viewed as an effort, however misguided, to achieve representation in a historiography with few Hindu American characters, the second HAF point is evidence of a broader, more insidious, agenda. In the 4th Grade-Modern California section, changing Dalip Singh Saund’s identification from “a Sikh” to “an Indian” immigrant does violence to the historical record left by the first Asian American member of Congress.

The HAF claims that “in most historical accounts, Dalip Singh Saund is referred to and self-identifies as immigrant of Indian origin. Many of his own writings demonstrate this fact, including *My Mother India*.”

This is patently absurd. Not only does the HAF fail to offer any specific “historical accounts” or citation from Dr. Saund’s writings to support this allegation, but it is clear whoever made this disingenuous assertion read neither the book cited above, nor Dr. Saund’s autobiography.

My Mother India was in fact commissioned and published by the *gurdwara* (Sikh temple) in Stockton, California, for which Dr. Saund served for many years as treasurer, long before joining Congress. His long-standing association with the Stockton *gurdwara* began on his first morning in California, as he details in chapter two of his autobiography:

The next morning I rushed to the Ferry Building and took the ferry to Berkeley, the seat of the University of California. I went straight to 1731 Allston Way, where I found the clubhouse established and maintained by the Sikh Temple in Stockton, California.

If these decisive facts were not enough of an indication of his identification as a Sikh, one can turn to his writings. In the preface to his autobiography, *Congressman from India*, Dr. Saund mentions that “my religion teaches me that love and service to fellow men are the road to earthly bliss and spiritual salvation.” In the first chapter, he speaks of his mother’s strong devotion to the Sikh faith, and “her favorite verse, which I heard many times and which became a part of my teaching” — from the *Guru Granth Sahib*, the Sikh scripture.

Dr. Saund also remembers fondly how his Sikh religious education was lovingly conveyed by illiterate parents:

We were taught to salute and to bow our heads every time we met a man of religion, a teacher, or an elderly person. At home, every evening we listened to prayers sung from memory by either my father or my mother. Then, before going to bed, we said our own prayers. They were always couched in song, and were thus pleasant to recite and easy to remember.

Dr. Saund undoubtedly used a geographical designation familiar to his American audience in the title of his books, and he was a staunch nationalist who sought to rid his homeland of British imperialism. Nonetheless, readers of his writings and students of his life come away with a clear understanding of Dr. Saund’s devotion to his faith, and his strong identification as a Sikh.

The HAF effort to downplay Congressman Saund’s very strong Sikh identity, as demonstrated by his close connection to the Stockton *gurdwara*, mimics similar efforts in India to undermine and subsume minority religious identity under Hinduism. While modern Hindu supremacists have been controversially “Hindu-izing” school curriculums since the recent electoral victories by a Hindu nationalist party in India’s elections, the homogenizing influence of Hinduism upon minority faiths stretches back millennia, explaining why Buddhism is virtually extinct in the land of its birth.

For Sikhs, the institutionalized nature of the discrimination against them as a tiny minority in India, comprising approximately 2% of the population, is best exemplified by a clause of the Indian Constitution that describes the Sikh faith as a sect of Hinduism. This language precipitated the Sikh delegation to India’s constitutional convention to walk out, leaving the document still unsigned by Sikh representatives nearly seven decades later.

The attempt to erase Dr. Saund's distinct religious heritage extends into the diaspora an effort by Hindu fundamentalists in India to portray Sikhs as a subset of Hinduism, a notion deeply offensive to Sikhs. Members of an independent faith who have always zealously guarded their secular and religious sovereignty, Sikhs eschew any endeavor to subsume them under any faith tradition—let alone a faith tradition whose theological precepts were so strongly rejected by Guru Nanak, the faith tradition's founder.

Moving to the fifth comment by HAF, regarding the eighth grade section, "The Rise of Industrial America," the group again wants to insert "South Asian" in place of the religious groups "Hindu, and Sikh." The HAF asks why include religious communities "when the remaining references are to ethnicities/nationalities?" As explained above, Sikhs comprise a distinct ethnic group, one without a nation/state. Their lack of nationhood does not, in any way, detract from their ethnic status. The use of the term Sikh is appropriate for that reason, as well as the others enumerated in response to the first HAF comment. The curriculum should, in fact, add "Muslim" to the list of religious groups to achieve highest accuracy, as there were far more Muslims than Hindus in this migratory stream.

In the sixth and final HAF comment, in the 9th grade "Survey of World Religions" section, I recommend removing "the Dasam Granth" from the list of items central to Sikh theology. The text is controversial within the community, and peripheral to the practice of the vast majority of the world's twenty-five million Sikhs.

Lastly, the lone comment by CAPEEM, reproduced in its entirety below, regarding this same section, is remarkably inappropriate and in bad faith on multiple levels:

This is factually incorrect, and not only a veiled attack on Hinduism which is caricatured as a religion of idol worship and caste system, but also insulting to Sikhism since it is now reduced to a social reform system from an uplifting spiritual system. Starting with their external appearance instead of their beliefs is also insulting to Sikhs. The reference to so-called "idol worship" needs to be deleted. Hindus worship idols as much as Christians worship the cross. Caste is a social structure which exists among Hindus as well as Sikhs and was not a religious idea and hence needs to be deleted from any discussion of religion.

First of all is CAPEEM's effort to divorce caste and idol worship from Hindu religious practice and theology. Any serious scholar of religion or religious history can confirm that this is untrue. This prevarication immediately calls into question the legitimacy of CAPEEM's intervention.

Further undermining CAPEEM's credibility is its intentional misrepresentation of the caste system as "a social structure which exists among Hindus as well as Sikhs," attempting to divorce Hinduism from its well documented, and ongoing, history of oppression towards low castes. And while some Sikhs may indeed cling to aspects of Hinduism's ubiquitous caste structures in India, that does not lessen the severity with which the Sikh faith condemns caste consciousness. Any effort to claim otherwise is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of Sikh theology, and deep ignorance of Sikh scripture and the entire history of the community.

The ban on idol worship and caste adherence are in fact central to Sikh theology, and are addressed repeatedly in the *Guru Granth Sahib*. In practice, the seminal Sikh institution of *Guru ka langer*, the free kitchen found in each *gurdwara*, testifies to the centrality of destroying caste distinctions in the message of the founders of the Sikh faith.

Secondly, and even more egregiously for the Sikh American community, is the effort of outsiders to attempt to erroneously define for the Sikh community what it considers “insulting.” This is no different than the manner in which India’s constitution devalues and subsumes under Hinduism the independent, 500-year-old Sikh religious tradition. Sikhs proudly understand, and describe to others, their history as members of a reform faith tradition which stresses radical egalitarianism, and the elimination of discrimination from societal distinctions like race, class, gender, and caste.

Finally, CAPEEM’s suggestion to remove from the list of the defining aspects of the Sikh tradition, “articles of faith,” wearing of the turban,” and “rejection of idol worship and the caste system” is deeply offensive to Sikhs. CAPEEM’s attempt to deny Sikhs the right to define for themselves the most salient aspects of their faith tradition, and to modify Sikh theology to their own ends, is an intolerable external intrusion. Central aspects of lived Sikh identity, the Sikh articles of faith carry an emotional and personal significance that cannot easily be conveyed to outsiders to the faith tradition. This is particularly true of the Sikh turban, which has been the target of so many racist attacks in the past 120 years of Sikh American history.

Clearly, the critiques made by HAF and CPEEM are historically inaccurate. But what is far more disturbing is that the broad tenor of this attack by Hindu nationalists seeks to strip Sikhs of their right to independently define themselves, and offer their perspective on the manner in which their history and religion are represented. These are serious violations of scholarly norms and fairness. Even worse, this concerted ploy is obviously designed to erase Sikh Americans from the curriculum to which they have just been added. This subverts the intent of these recent curricular additions, to increase the accuracy of how our children are taught our collective history.

The time has come for the state’s children to learn that Sikh Americans, so often victimized by hate crimes marking them as outsiders, have in fact contributed to the development of California for well over a century. I hope the Instructional Quality Commission will take stock of the evidence and give it greater credence than the clearly biased efforts of unqualified evaluators of the sociological and historical record. Please contact me if I can clarify my comments, or be of service.

Sincerely,

Jaideep Singh, Ph.D.

Email: jaideep@saldef.org
Mobile: (510) 967-2538